



Nico Munuera

Shima / of Moss and Sand

From September 10th to November 7th 2020

When the influential American historian Robert Rosenblum published a series of lectures, delivered in Oxford in 1972, under the title *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition. Friedrich to Rothko*, published in English in 1975, his ideas caused quite a stir. To begin with, they created a narrative of modern art that was not focused on Paris. Furthermore, he spoke of the sublime at a time when Minimalism and the formalist discourses that underpinned it were seeing great success: painting, it was said at the time, was merely an indicator of its physical characteristics, and having reached this point, it was no longer possible for it to evolve any further. Artists such as Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman, however, had made it very clear, a short time before, in describing the semantic ambitions of their colour fields, also being explicit about the nature of their work, which they deemed tragic. Agnes Martin and Ad Reinhardt held similar views, and were wrongly considered proto-minimalists, as if the spiritual aspect of their work was irrelevant. At that time, we insist, there was talk of the death of painting.

Then, in the eighties and nineties, unexpectedly, new generations of painters believed that abstraction was still an ideal way of addressing metaphysical, aesthetic, moral, spiritual and socio-political issues. Among these painters, some such as Sean Scully, Juan Uslé and Per Kirkeby are deemed to be successors of that tradition that Rosenblum referred to as "northern". The paintings of Nico Munuera (Lorca, 1974), who has been creating for over twenty years, are also in keeping with this tradition, although he does so by adding a sceptical or ironic aspect, as well as analytical or reflective ones, that would put him closer to Gerhard Richter or to the photographers of the Düsseldorf School. His paintings deal with the physical characteristics of the materials he uses and with the processes with which he paints them, based on horizontal sweeping strokes of flattened pigments. Munuera has even exhibited material that illustrated these processes, including the process of putting on an exhibition (as in his exhibition *Praecisio*, IVAM, Valencia, 2017). But despite his process-based and conceptual nature, and his discursive clarity, his final works of art are open to interpretation. For example, references to landscapes and gardens, metaphors of works of art, as well as references to certain elements of Japanese culture, have been part of his work for some time now.

This is the case, again, in his latest series of paintings, presented here under the title *Shima. Of Moss and Sand*. The titles of the works are mostly in Latin, hinting at, as they are also made up of two words together, the scientific name given to different botanical species. Nevertheless, this is not the case, and the words in the titles refer to qualities, such as arid; places of worship, such as temple; heavenly bodies, such as moon; formal aspects, such as line; or, more often than not, species and botanical terms, such as red maple, leaves, moss, wood or grass. Some titles in Japanese go deeper into this botanical meaning; *Hinoki* being, for example, a type of Japanese ornamental cypress. The scientific aspect of the titles is well-suited to the systematic nature of Munuera's work, while taking into account its possibly more complex metaphorical qualities.

The paintings, on the other hand, show us monochromatic backgrounds with different-coloured shading with green, red and a pale blue being the most frequently used. Munuera also adds

golden pigments, which, apart from giving rise to metallic reflections on the surface of his paintings, hints at other aspects of Japanese culture. It evokes the Golden Pavilion in Kyoto, a Zen Buddhist temple renowned for its elegance, and also because it was burned down by a monk in the 50's declaring he could not bear its beauty, a story that was fictionalised by Yukio Mishima. On the canvases' empty spaces, sometimes forming diptychs, a linear horizontal occurrence that evokes a landscape; deserted and romantic at the same time. Sometimes it is just a line, other times, minimal resources or elements evoke mountains, rivers and vegetation. Munuera has entitled the exhibition *Shima. Of Moss and Sand*, relating its works to the famous Japanese Zen gardens, such as *Ryoan-ji*, also in Kyoto. This unique garden is located in a not very large rectangular terrain covered with pebbles, surrounded on three sides by low clay walls. Fifteen rocks are spread out on its surface, laid on patches of moss. The garden is renowned for its beauty, however, from any given point on the viewing platform, a seated visitor can only see 14 of the 15 stones. Its visual meaning is also up for debate; a tigress crossing a river with her cubs, or the sight of distant mountains and islets. *Ryoan-ji* is a wonder of concentration and precision. Observers cannot move around it and look at it as if they were contemplating a landscape or a painting, from some benches located at its open side. It is a place for meditation, in the sense of spiritual practice.

These latter paintings by Munuera also remind us, although unsure if it is in a conscious way, of the mysterious landscapes of the surrealist painter, Yves Tanguy. Tanguy painted vast monochrome, milky-white landscapes filled with abstract organic shapes in more intense colours. These two references, to Zen meditation and to the absolute reality which André Breton spoke of, and which united reality with the world of dreams, foster the understanding of Munuera's work. His painting style is rational and systematic, meticulously created and following easy-to-discern processes. It is created, moreover, using very few elements: the brushstroke, the material, the colour, the light, the texture..., but all this is at the service of the meditative, the metaphorical and the emotional.

Susan Sontag, writing about Cioran, as well as Benjamin and Canetti, spoke of the way in which his work came from the awareness of working on the ruins of thought, history and man, the quintessential theme of the 20th century. The most outstanding creators and thinkers have sought to discover a bastion of meaning that would allow them to reconstruct the world. Munuera's work is enormously ambitious in taking on this thought. His painting (and his film work) is also related to the tension between object and metaphor, or between reality and fantasy, another theme discussed by Sontag, this time when she discusses Freud and the meaning of modern art.

In *Libro de tiempo* (2019), a book that includes an extensive interview between Álvaro de los Ángeles and Nico Munuera, the artist says the following: "I have always felt painting to be very similar to the feeling, as absurd as it is sublime, of climbing a mountain". This brings to mind René Daumal's unfinished novel, *Mount Analagous*, which details a scientific expedition by sea to an island and a non-existent mountain. When the island is reached, which, just to be clear, does not exist, the participants in the expedition search for some strange spherical crystals that are only visible to those who are searching for them. It is tempting to think of painting in this way; still a practice that maintains a spiritual meaning, even after decades of ironic discourses.

Enrique Juncosa, 2020.